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DEPARTMENT OF STATE

TRANSCRIPT OF SPECIAL NEWS BRIEFING
MONDAY, NOVEMBER 20, 1978, 4:35 P.M.

(ON THE RECORD UNLESS OTHERWISE NOTED)

MR. CARTER: All right, ladies and gentlemen. The Deputy Assistant Secretary will take up again where he left off at 1:05.

MR. BUSHNELL: Thanks, Hodding.

I'll start off with just a few developments that we've had since and then we can go back to the questions.

I have to be somewhat apologetic, and I want to make it clear that I'm being apologetic; I'm not being defensive. I gather some of you thought I was being defensive this morning that I do not have as much inforation as I had hoped.

We have a four-man military communication team which we are deploying to Jonetown up country that will have direct communication through Panama to us here; and this would give us by far, infinitely far, the best communication that we've had to date with the area where these incidents have occurred.

I had hoped we would have that communication facility operating before this briefing and I would have the first readout direct from our people in Jonestown.

However, because of the bad weather this morning, the fact that the Embassy finally was able to charter the one Cessna in the country to get them up there, the fact that they've had to move their equipment from the airport into Jonestown, they are not yet operational. The present estimate is that it will be another couple of hours before they'll be operational. I suppose that in the usual way of Murphy's Law there may be more things that will go wrong. So I do not yet have what I had hoped to have, which is direct contact with Americans in the Jonesville site of greatest concern.

What we have, therefore, is a certain amount of indirect information passed to us by the Guyanese from their people on the ground.

The first -- perhaps the main -- piece of interesting information from -- let me repeat again so everybody is clear on this -- this is information the Guyanese police forces have passed back to their headquarters and they have then passed to us. In some cases they have also apparently made a public announcement. The Guyanese forces on the ground report that their people who know by sight Bishop Jim Jones have identified him among the dead,

as well as his wife and children.

Q How many children -- do you know?

A I do not have a number of children.

Q Thank you.

A Since we do not have that from an American source, I can only tell you that is what has been reported to us by the Guyanese authorities. I gather they have also made an announcement of that in Guyana. They have told us that some of their people on the ground have known this individual, have worked with him and met him in the past, and have made an identification. We will be working with them, of course, in various technical ways of a positive identification when our people are equipped to do that and their people are on the ground there.

The other piece of information which they have passed back in the same way is that they say the latest actual count which the Guyanese police on the ground in Jonestown have of the bodies that they've identified -- they found thus far -- is 363. That is not presented to us as a definitive count. That is the count as of this afternoon that they had sent back through their channels. Of course, they may find additional bodies as they pursue their search of the area.

The other information which I can pass on to you deals with the movement of the bodies of the dead Americans out of Georgetown. I can give you what is at this point only a rough schedule. Until we actually get planes airborne that will not be completely definitive. But we now anticipate that about 8 o'clock our time -- local time here -- - C-141 will take off from Georgetown with the bodies of Congressman Ryan and of the three news persons. That plane will fly directly to Charleston, South Carolina, to the air base there. That's approximately a six-hour flight.

In Charleston, the Congressman's body, which is being accompanied by one of his staff aides, will be transferred to another aircraft and taken directly to the West Coast of San Francisco. It is the present estimate that that will be a fairly quick turnaround, an hour or two. The Congressman's body will, therefore, be in San Francisco in the course of tomorrow morning.

We will have to wait until the first plane become airborne and that situation then becomes more definitely under our control.

Q What about the other dead Americans that will not be transferred?

A There is one other dead American -- the member of the other Peoples Temple who was killed in the shooting at the airport. That body is not being moved at this time due to difficulties in identification and notifying next of kin.

Q You only mentioned -- or did I mishear you -- transferring the Congressman's body.

Q What about the NBC crew?

A It is our present thought-we we would probably transfer the other bodies of people who had been resident on the West Coast in the same way to the same plane.

Q Oh.

A That is not yet confirmed with next of kin, so I do not want to give that to you as a definitive statement. But that would be the most probably situation -- which is that all the bodies which are to go to the West Coast would be moved on the same aircraft from Charleston to the West Coast.

We have some technical problems in terms of state of some of these remains, which could introduce a complication into that; but that is our present thinking.

Q What is the name of the Air Force base at

at Charleston, please? Do you have that?

A I do not know the name of the Air Force base at Charleston. Is there anybody that knows that offhand?

Q Do you have any further information about the way these people died?

A The people in Jonestown you're referring to?

Q Yes.

A We do not have anything that's firm. However, we do have -- I said this morning that the report indicated that there were no signs of external trauma. The later reports suggested that there are some people who apparently have died from gunshot wounds. What the breakdown is, we have no information; but there has been some talk among the Guyanese o-ficials of two categories -- one killed by gunfire, and the others without external wounds.

Q Mr. Bushnell, do you have any better handle now on what's happening to people who apparently scattered into the bush -- whether they're turning up back at Jonestown, whether more of them are still straggling in -- or maybe what kind of numbers are now showing up?

A We do not have any information from Jonestown

about people coming back in there. We know that there are some people who have appeared at police posts around the area. There are a few who have appeared in Georgetown. How many more there may be in the bush -- when we'll get some identification of them coming out -- there are some police posts that have no radio communication. There may be people that have come out to those police posts; we would not yet know it. So until we get our communications with our own people there and are able to facilitate the transportation of the Guyanese themselves when we get some helicopters there tomorrow, we don't have a very good reading on that.

Q The helicopters aren't going in until tomorrow?

A Unfortunately, we had hoped earlier today to have the first two helicopters delivered in the evening tonight, assembled overnight so they would be operational first thing in the morning. That has been delayed for technical reasons. We have to fly in a crane to assemble them. And so the plane, both with the helicopters and another plane with the crane, will be arriving early tomorrow morning. The latest estimate that I have

from Defense is that the first two helicopters will be operational tomorrow afternoon.

Q I wanted to see,if I could, if there's anything further you wanted to say about how much the Congressman was made aware or warned about the trip because his aide -- and I don't know if you knew about these statements before your earlier briefing, but let me just read them to you. There's just a couple of statements. See if you want to add anything on that subject. This is Holsinger, and he said that the State Department apparently gave the Congressman no warning of danger. "The only thing of which I'm aware is they cautioned us only about the inadequacy of accommodations" for the party of aides.

Also Holsinger said there were indications from State Department officials that they "considered this to be a benign settlement." But he said Ryan was warned of a possible threat to his safety by interviews with defectors from the commune.

Do you want to address that or have you said all you wanted to say at the earlier briefing?

A I at this point don't want to try to get into endless detail on what was said in various

meetings with the Congressman and with members of his staff, which began with Assistant Secretary Vaky back in September, which have been carried forward in a number of separate interviews. It was recalled to me by a person who participated in the first briefing. I think it was on September 15th, the middle of September, that it was suggested in that first meeting even that the Congressman might want to take a clinical psychiatrist with him on his group -- given problems that had been identified.

There were other suggestions and comments that have been made to the Congressman and to his staff during this period which I think suggested an element of risk in this enterprise -- not necessarily that we thought that this was a group that would have done anything to him necessarily. We did point out that he would be able to visit the group, in our view, only with the permission of the People's Temple and that we could not expect the Guyanese Government to enforce, if you will, a visit by someone which the People's Temple did not welcome -- since it was their private property and the Guyanese Government would respect that.

Q Mr. Bushnell, my notes reflect your saying earlier, at your earlier briefing, that over the last year there were many conversations. Are you saying now the first conversation was only two months ago?

A The first conversation about this visit. There have been conversations over the last year about the situation of the People's Temple --

Q I see.

A -- in Guyana there with the Congressman and with his staff. To my knowledte the first time that we had a conversation about him visiting the colony was in mid-September.

Q Right.

A There have been several conversations with him and a large number with his staff people between mid-September and now. We did arrange for a comprehensive briefing by our Legal people on the legal situation. We arranged for a comprehensive briefing by our Consular people. Some of these were for his staff; some were for him. I don't have an exact sorting out of that, of all that we knew -- information that we had about the

People's Temple and the problems that we anticipated, including the problem that they might refuse to receive him.

Q Is it the proper inference that the clinical psychologist would help the Congressman and his people approach the sect people? I forgot the way you said State Department people approached them -- with some circumspection or something? Is that the point of the clinical psychologist -- he would know how to deal with people like this and maybe Congressman Ryan wouldn't otherwise? I don't get the point.

A I would think that the point would be that as a technical specialist he would be able to advise the Congressman and his party of potential analysis in his field of competence, which would be a field probably not otherwise present on the Congressional delegation.

Yes.

Q Mr. Bushnell, my publication got information that this cult was involved in drug-running. Now, Jonestown does sit in the marijuana-planting center of the country and generally religious cults throughout the Caribbean are connected to drug usage, if not drug-smuggling. Are you

looking at this angle? Do you have anything on it?

A We do not have anything on it. This was not something that came to the attention of our Consular Officers when they visited. However, I would have no basis, certainly, to make a firm denial of any sort other than the facts that you point out about the area and the general situation are true. That is not to say that we have any information that indicated that this particular settlement was involved in drugs in any way.

Q Mr. Bushnell, this morning, sir -- this morning --

Q Excuse me. I want to follow that up.

Do you have any plans to question Jerry Brown about his knowledge about this group?

A Governor Brown, you're referring to?

Q Yes.

A We have been in touch with Governor Brown and have been exchanging information with him in the course of today -- personally with him -- and in the course of the weekend with his staff.

Q Will any of that kind of material be made

public?

A I would myself not have any plans to make that public. I think it would be up to his office if he wished to make it public. Essentially, we have been informing them of what we knew was going on -- the same as I've been informing you.

Q Has he provided any information to you that has been useful to you?

A He has provided some information of a background nature available to him about the People's Temple in California, yes.

Q Mr. Bushnell, do you know how Lane and Garry got from Jonestown to Georgetown and do you know whether any other Americans who were in the Ryan traveling party who were not accounted for among the dead or injured were also evacuated to Georgetown?

A I do not know how they got to Georgetown from the area. I believe at this point that all the members of the CODEL who left Georgetown and when to Jonestown are accounted for.

Now, those who joined the party for the return trip from Jonestown, since we never had a listing --

Q Right.

A -- and there even seems to be some confusion of exactly how many there were -- may not be fully accounted for.

Q But the 18 of the original group are accounted for?

A It is my understanding that of the number of people who went by aircraft up -- all of them have been accounted for at this time.

Q This morning you said you didn't want to talk about the interview with Lane for privacy reasons or you were still piecing it together or something. Since then Mark Lane has had a news conference down there in which he has detailed having heard a vat or a bathtub full of poison being brought in and actually hearing the gunshots, et cetera. Could you be a little more specific about what you now know from the various interviews as to what took place?

A We still have quite a confusing picture. It's not clear to me because we have various pieces.

It is my understanding, for example, that Mr. Lane did not actually himself see any people being shot or otherwise

killed because it apparently did not start until he was leaving the area of the camp. He heard a number of shots.

We have a number of confusing reports on that basis and until we have more definitive information I think for me to speculate in a way which would probably turn out to be half-truths in one way or another would be counterproductive.

I think as far as what we say from this platform we really have to get more facts before we can try to lay out -- and we'll try to do this as soon as we can -- what we believe happend in Jonestown that led to so many dead.

Q Could we follow up, if I may? How much in conflict and how much at odds are these statements you're getting?

Q Would you forgive those of us who have to file?

A Yes.

Q We had asked Hodding if we might leave, and would you accept our thanks --

A Yes.

Q -- and excuse those of us who have to leave? Thank you very much.

Q Could you just say how much in conflict you

think some of those statements are, how much at odds? Are you getting totally disparate accounts?

A We have accounts which have quite a wide variety of stories. Let me say that the spectrum sort of goes like this. And remember that I'm talking about various reports, some of which reportedly are eye-witnesses -- some of which were not -- most of which have come, all of us here have come, to a second -- even third-hand -- between a situation in which people were lined up in some sort of formation and to poison -- other stories which involve essentially the machine-gunning and shooting-down of people.

Now, there's a wide spectrum of this. It is possible, of course, that some of both happened. And until we can sort this out, until we have a better reading of the nature of the bodies and the situation indicating how they died and so forth, we really are not in a position to say in any definitive sort of way what happened there.

I have to repeat that our people have not yet been able to report to us from the site. And so all we have is scattered reports coming back from the police on the site very indirectly to us.

(cont'd pg. B-1)

Q I have a technical question.

Once you establish this link through the Panama Canal Zone, will you report here to us before the Guyanese Government does in Georgetown because obviously you are going to have a direct line to Georgetown then?

A It is not my intention to be in the business of trying to report first. As we get information which we feel is confirmed from our people on the site we will make every effort to pass it on promptly to the press in this country. Whether that turns out to be quicker than it is announced in Georgetown or not, I don't know. I understand that a number of press persons have managed to get on aircraft going to the Jonestown area today and presumably will have themselves been able to get into the vicinity if not into the actual site. When they will have an opportunity for filing, I have no idea.

Q Since your last Briefing has the Guyanese Government requested any further technical or military assistance and is any being provided other than the

helicopters you referred to and the communications equipment?

A Since my last Briefing they have made only a couple of requests for technical sort of equipment for exploring the area beyond helicopters and radio communications and the provision of a light plane, as well as other transport. We may even be able eventually to use C-130s to an air strip not too far from the area, 35 miles from the area.

We are providing a number of equipment items, such as torches, airfield lights, sleeping bags, these sorts of things which there is a non-availability in the security forces of Guyana.

Remember Guyana is quite a poor country, one of the poorer countries in this hemisphere. They don't have a lot of modern equipment for their police and security forces. So that, the operation that they have been mounting in this situation has strained their resources very substantially and we are trying to provide those things that are needed so that their police forces can carry out their role in this area, investigative role, and also encourage any people who may be out in

the bush to come in and be given a supper.

Q Just to follow-up, can I ask if that is all of a non-military or non-weapon type of --

A We are not providing anything that would be lethal that you would use to shoot with, that sort of thing. Many of the items we are providing are technically legal, technically military items, that we will take out of a military warehouse. But they do not have a lethal purpose. They have a support purpose.

Q Can you give us some further information on the relationship between the Peoples Temple and the Guyanese Government?

A moment ago you said that you told the Congressman that the Government would respect the fact that this was their private property.

What arrangement did this group initially make with the Government to buy this and what sort of relationship did they have and what kind of sanction did they have to do what they did?

A I do not know and I don't know of anybody here in Washington, or perhaps even in our Embassy, that

knows the details; whether the land there was bought, leased or what have you.

There was an arrangement between the Peoples Temple and the Guyanese Government which allowed them either the ownership or the use of the land where they were and of certain supply facilities, the use of short wave radio. These sorts of things had all been worked out with the Guyanese Government.

I think I might try to put this in a little broader perspective. In Guyana you have a wide variety of religions, you have a very mixed population. As you may know, ethnically roughly half the population is black, roughly half is Hindu and descended from East Indian population. It is an area which has long had a great variety of religions and of groups and that this has been respected over the years. Therefore, not just in terms of the Peoples Temple operation, but in terms of the general policy of the Guyanese Government was to try to be supportive of various religious groups provided that they operated within the laws of the country and did not create problems. That was their own feeling on this.

I can remember over a year ago I had a conversation myself with the Foreign Minister of Guyana who recognized that there were a number of problems where cases such as the custody cases I mentioned this morning were avoiding the Guyanese courts and were a problem. But he pointed out to me the long tradition of the Guyanese Government in respecting religious groups and religious freedom and they looked at this essentially in that line and that is the way they considered it and were in that sense supportive of not interfering in the activities of the Peoples Temple so long as it complied with the laws of the land.

Q Mr. Bushnell, do you know of a May 10th letter from 57 parents and relatives of the people who were allegedly being held prisoner at Jonestown in which they claimed to give you affidavits documenting their barbed wire fences, close surveillance, T.V. sets at Jonestown, to watch the people, censored mail and all sorts of problems?

This letter was sent on the 10th of May to the Secretary, but on the 19th of May a copy went to the Secretary, Mr. Christopher, Mr. Bennett, Patrician Derian,

Mr. Carter.

A I am aware of that letter. If I looked at it earlier, I have not looked at it now.

Let me in relation to that point out one additional figure which I have gotten between our Briefings today, and that is that over 75 Temple members have been talked to by our Consular Officers over the last year. Not one confirmed any of the allegations of mistreatment. The Consular Officer --

Q W. it.

When you say "the allegations of mistreatment", the allegations contained in that letter?

A Not necessarily just in that letter. There have been other communications that we have received of various sorts which have argued that.

Q These are 75 people about whom relatives or somebody had made complaints.

A I cannot say. Most of them were ones where there had been a complaint. There may be included in that some others that they talked to for reasons obscure.

Q Before you go on, you are aware that this

letter also mentions a suicide pact that they say these people were forced into?

A I do not recall that it mentions it, but if you have a copy of the letter, I assume that it does.

Q Well, I still don't understand --

A I don't understand. What is the thrust of your question?

Q The thrust of my question is: Did the Department reply or what did the Department do after it received this letter?

MR. CARTER: John, let me answer that.

We are looking now, as far as replies go --

Q Hodding, come on. Up there.

MR. CARTER: I mean we are looking as far as replies go and we are trying to find that information out.

Q Sir, I am not quite sure I follow --

Q Wait. I will follow-up my own. Thank you.

In other words, you know of this letter, but you have no idea what became of it.

If I put what you say and what Mr. Carter says

together --

A Let me say that we have received a substantial volume of mail contending in one way or the other that somebody, some family members generally, some acquaintance, was in some way or other being abused -- let me put it that way because this covers a wide spectrum of accusations -- in Jonestown. We have forwarded all of these or the information contained in them to our Embassy in Jonestown. The Consular Officer has examined these. He has talked to the people about whom these had been made.

As we say, he has talked to 75. And in these conversations, which have been in most cases personal and private meetings, none have confirmed either specific allegations made through mail that we received or indicated that there was some other abuse that was involved.

Q Sir, you seem to answer these allegations by saying that you talked to people individually and they didn't express any interes about coming out. But if any of those allegations happened to be true, if passports were being seized, if there were actual threats against

potential defectors, threats on their lives, is merely walking into a camp and getting a guy off in a room by himself and saying do you want to leave, is that adequate investigation of the complaint? Wouldn't there be a built-in fear on that person's part if, as you said this morning, none of your people were in a position to put their arm around him and say do you want to come out with me?

A Let me make clear that I did not say that we asked the question did he want to leave. We asked a series of questions. They could have volunteered that.

In most cases when they came to the Consular Officer they had their passport. It was in their physical possession. Often there was a passport action required.

Certainly I think if we speculate a little bit that in a number of individual cases one would think that was true.

I must say that I am impressed personally by the fact that over 75 interviews with different people not one indicated this sort of concern. I could see how

some might be concerned, but it seems to me that this was a record which did not suggest that much concern.

Now, I am not trying to propose that the conditions -- I do not know what the conditions in that camp were -- nor is it the business of the U.S. Government and our Consular Corps around the world to necessarily pass on the conditions in which American citizens live. I am sure that we have American citizens all over the world who are living under conditions of one sort or another which various of their relatives in this country strongly disapprove of. And the Consular Corps really cannot be in the business of trying to police that on behalf of the parents.

What we were doing: These people were American citizens as much as the people who have complained about it. We were trying to give them as an American citizen an opportunity to let the U.S. Government know if they thought they had a problem which they might need their help or and they did not let us know that.

Q You are saying that that private questioning of individuals you felt to be examination enough of the

problem or potential problem?

A I think in many cases our Consular Officers went further than under other circumstances around the world they could go in raising this sort of question.

I have to repeat that we cannot expect our Consular Officers to go into great depth with American citizens as to whether they have any problems. They can give an opportunity for American citizens to complain to them essentially. And I will tell you a lot of American citizens around the world do complain to Consular Officers.

Q Did they report any signs of emotional aberrations or instability?

Was there anything unusual at all about any of the 75 reported back by the Consular Officers?

A Sure.

I mean after all here we have people that have decided to go down and live in the jungles of Guyana. I suppose that is not the most normal thing. There were certain hardships and so forth that one would have to associate with that and make certain allowances for.

So, in that sense I would certainly not say they reported that they were living a normal Bronx life. (Laughter.)

Q Mr. Bushnell, was there any attempt when State was notified or told by relatives of a mass suicide pact to notify Guyana officials and investigate that further?

A To my knowledge there was not. We had heard reports of a suicide pact. I am sure that people that were concerned with this in this country had heard these reports. I don't even know that there was any attempt by the Peoples Temple to keep this quiet.

On the other hand, I am not sure what the proper action of U.S. officials are. If American citizens want to enter into a suicide pact, I myself don't particularly approve of that, but as I am an American citizen American officials are supposed to tell American citizens they can't do that. Certainly we didn't have much facility to do that, particularly given the position in Guyana, under whose law they were operating being relatively open to various religious groups of all sorts.

Q Mr. Bushnell, just also fumbling around with this question of what a Consular Officer feels free to do. In most of these cases there was a complaint from some relative presumably.

Would a Consular Officer routinely go in and sit down with a person at Jonestown and say your mother or your brother or your sister or whomever says you are being abused here, what do you have to say about that, do you have any complaints?

That might be a routine kind of question, but would they go that far?

A It is my understanding that what they would usually do is to say that we have heard from your family member, whoever it might be, they seem to be very concerned about you. They would then let the conversation go where it may. That person might say: Well, gee, it has been two months since I have written. Maybe I better write pretty soon. Or that is too bad. Whatever they say they would explore the conversation.

They are not in the business of conducting a 5th degree examination. They have to sort of provide the opening and hear what the person says and that really

is the way that this is being conducted.

Let me correct right now one thing that I said this morning which I found in one question that I took this morning, which was the times of the visits. I had thought that we had visited monthly. There are a number of months that we didn't visit.

In 1978 a Consular Officer visited in January, February, May and November. The last visit was on November 7th.

That is the answer to the question that I took this morning. I am sorry that I was not strictly correct when I said that we made about monthly visits. That is only four visits thus far this year, unless you count the visit of the DCM who, of course, was with the Congressional party last Friday-Saturday.

But I exclude that. This was Consular for Consular purposes, these four visits in 1978.

Q What was it that triggerred the implementation of the suicide pact? Have you established that yet? Do you know what the immediate cause was?

A I have no official firm knowledge that there was a suicide pact or that it was implemented.

Q Or the homicides.

A What we know is that there are a large number of people dead. Until we know more, we will not know what the scenario was and I don't want to speculate further on that.

Q Are there other religious groups either in South America or anyplace else, to your knowledge, that you get letters about and have to send Consular members in to talk to relatives the same way as they did with this group?

A Yes.

This is -- I am not saying it is a common problem, but there are other situations where we have a similar or analogous problem. I don't want to get into giving a list of these. I think we would have problems with that.

But there are other problems of an analogous sort that we have in Latin America and for that matter elsewhere.

Q Thank you.

(At 5:15 the Briefing concluded.)